

2014

Held

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Held

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of
Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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May, 2014

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

For everyone who has ever loved me and everyone I have ever loved. May we stay with each other forever.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PAGE

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT.....	ii
LIST OF FIGURES.....	iv
ARTIST STATEMENT.....	v
INTRODUCTION	1
EGGSHELL SHIRT FOR HUGGING - SKIN	3
HANDSHAKE COLLECTION.....	6
BEING WITH AND BEING WITHOUT.....	8
IMMORTALITY AND THE LIST OF WAYS TO LIVE FOREVER	11
TAPESTRY AND SAFETY INSTRUCTIONS.....	17
RECOLLECTION OBJECTS	19
HOLDING AND BEING HELD	28
BIBLIOGRAPHY	32
CURRICULUM VITAE	33

LIST OF FIGURES

	PAGE
FIGURE 1: <i>Family Slides (installation)</i> , 2011	2
FIGURE 2: <i>Family Slides</i> , 2011	2
FIGURE 3: <i>Eggshell Shirt for Hugging</i> , 2012	3
FIGURE 4: <i>Eggshell Shirt for Hugging</i> , 2012	3
FIGURE 5: <i>Handshake Collection (detail)</i> , 2013	5
FIGURE 6: <i>Handshake Collection</i> , 2013	6
FIGURE 7: <i>Hairloom</i> , 2013	9
FIGURE 8: <i>Hair Tally</i> 2013	10
FIGURE 9: <i>Hair Tally (detail)</i> , 2013	10
FIGURE 10: <i>Hourglass</i> , 2013	10
FIGURE 11: <i>Name a Star After Myself (#147)</i> , 2013	12
FIGURE 12: <i>Attempt Mitosis (#48)</i> , 2013	12
FIGURE 13: <i>Bathe in the Blood of Virgins (#68)</i> , 2013	13
FIGURE 14: <i>An Apple a Day (#203)</i> , 2013	13
FIGURE 15: <i>An Apple a Day (#203)</i> , 2013	13
FIGURE 16: <i>Attract Vampires (#2)</i>	14
FIGURE 17: <i>Attract Vampires (#2)</i>	14
FIGURE 18: <i>Make a Deal with the Devil (#41)</i> , 2013	15
FIGURE 19: <i>Wage & Win a War (#128)</i> , 2013	15
FIGURE 20: <i>Mother and Child (or Inhale)</i> , 2014	17
FIGURE 21: <i>Mother and Child (or Inhale)</i> , 2014.....	18
FIGURE 22: Rachel Whiteread, <i>Ghost</i> , 1990	19
FIGURE 23: Felix Gonzalez-Torres, <i>Untitled</i> (billboard), 1991	20
FIGURE 24: Jennifer Crupi, <i>Ornamental Hands: Figure One</i> , 2010	25
FIGURE 25: <i>Sitting Next to K.S.</i> , 2014	27
FIGURE 26: <i>Truly Love Someone (#115)</i> , 2014	28
FIGURE 27: <i>Dress for Farewell Hugs</i> , 2014	28
FIGURE 28: <i>Holding Hands (Within and Without)</i> , 2014	29
FIGURE 29: <i>Holding Hands (Within and Without)</i> detail, 2014	29
FIGURE 30: <i>Handshake with K.S.</i> , 2014	29
FIGURE 31: <i>Where We Meet (Inside)</i> , 2014	30
FIGURE 32: <i>Where We Meet (Inside)</i> detail, 2014	30

Artist Statement

HELD

By Erika Diamond, MFA

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2014

Director: Susan Iverson Professor, Department of Craft/Material Studies, School of the Arts

My work is a symptom of my ongoing quest to achieve immortality. I perpetually attempt to make permanent the traces we leave behind and the impressions we make upon each other. I use the body to portray boundaries – between the skin and the heart, comfort and disquiet, holding and letting go.

The objects I make serve both as an agent for physical contact and as the commemoration of an ephemeral interaction. I create personal fossils, revealing the interstices formed when two bodies come into contact with one another. I use materials that reference endurance and longevity to record transient spaces whose edges continuously shift and whose membranes are particularly tenuous. This work is an ongoing catalog of the people in my life and my persistent efforts to hold on to those fleeting connections.

INTRODUCTION

There are three deaths. The first when the body ceases to function. The second is when the body is consigned to the grave. The third is that moment, some time in the future, when your name is spoken for the last time.

- Contemporary Philosopher David Eagleman

This quote was given to me by a second year graduate student during my first semester here at VCU. It has continued to be relevant during this entire journey and as I reflect back it seems to have made sense to me all along. She has since graduated and moved on to other prospects. When I moved to Richmond, I left my partner of six years behind in Charlotte, assuming incorrectly that our relationship would survive the distance. The following year I began a new relationship with someone who lives hundreds of miles away and our future is uncertain. Throughout my childhood, my parents, both dancers, were intermittently leaving town or dropping me off to stay with family as they went on tour. I have lived in 6 cities and changed addresses 15 times. It is not so much the changing of place that affects me, but the awareness of how tenuous my connections are to other people and how limited my time is with them. Some relationships are maintained over distance or time, others simply fade into the background or wait to be rekindled. As each day passes, I feel that my time with people is being threatened. This work has been my attempt to make permanent my connections to people. I have tried living forever, weaving mementos, and creating

relics of touch. I keep trying.

My work is a symptom of my ongoing quest to achieve immortality and the need to leave behind evidence of my existence. I view touch as a way of sustaining each other, and objects as a potential way of sustaining touch. If an object has the ability to convey the memory of someone's touch, then what sort of truth can be revealed through touch? I have meandered through these questions in a way that makes associations between touch, immortality, memory, and documentation. Drawing connections between the skin and the heart, I will make a case for an object's inherent ability to contain memories, particularly the memory of another person's touch.

My investigations on this subject began with my *Family Slides* project in 2011 while in residence at McColl Center for Visual Art in Charlotte, NC. During this time a woman anonymously donated hundreds of her old family slides to me. By digitally inserting my image into her memories and printing new 35mm slides, I had found a way to extend my lifespan by usurping her history. This piece acted as a catalyst for further research into both extending my life and the function of objects as evidence.



Fig.1 *Family Slides (installation)*, 2011



Fig.2 *Family Slides (slide detail)*, 2011

EGGSHEL SHIRT FOR HUGGING - SKIN

It felt logical for me to use performance as a way to bring together by experience with wearable work and object making. It allowed me to tap into my connection to dance and the relationship between costume and movement. I arrived at this piece somewhat circularly, having first set out to create a costume inspired by an item on my List of Ways to Live Forever. The List becomes integral to my practice, but I will examine that journey later in this text. I began



Fig.3 *Eggshell Shirt for Hugging*, 2012

The List on a sheet of paper, and it included the concept of becoming an immortal figure



Fig. 4 *Eggshell Shirt for Hugging*
(performance still)

such as a Greek goddess. I was looking to create an armor-like shirt that spoke both of femininity and strength, death and rebirth. I turned to eggshells as a decorative element to highlight these qualities. I soon came to realize that I was not in fact creating a garment, but an actual costume to be worn by myself. I settled on performing hugs as a way to delve into the desire to attain comfort but speak about the difficulty and discomfort in arriving at such a goal by interacting with others. Eggshell fragments are stitched between layers of

silk and tulle. As I hug someone, the shells crack and create a live imprint of that moment. The desire to receive a hug conflicts with the unsettling sound of crushing shells, the knowledge that the piece is being altered, and the physical discomfort of shells against skin.

Thus began my interest in discovering ways to research and highlight the many functions and connotations of textiles. In this case, I was focusing on the potential for the textile to relay a narrative, to be skin, to act as a source of comfort as well as protection. My intention was to use the garment as a recording device for my physical interaction with others. The silk and the eggshells became a metaphor for the threshold that separates comfort from discomfort and to represent the skin that separates us from the rest of the world. I see the garment and our own skin as a permeable membrane that defines a threshold between the inside and the outside. It absorbs our memories, our rituals, our preferences, and our actions.

Above that of an image, I believe in the object's inherent ability to conjure memories, specifically of the memory of another person's presence. The object becomes a stand in for the "medium" of touch between oneself and others when flesh is absent. In this way, touch makes the untouchable – a person, a lost moment - inwardly accessible to a person's heart through their hand. Does it follow that an object can make the impermanent and untouchable permanently accessible as well? Does this mean that it is possible for people to metaphorically touch each other through an object? Can touch between people and objects stand in for touch between people?

HANDSHAKE COLLECTION

*Hoarders: Buried Alive*¹ is a present day reality television series that examines how people assign emotional connections between objects and people. Many of these hoarders have lost loved ones, and cling to the objects left behind as a way of holding on to the people they have lost. In Episode 47, we follow the story of “Beverly” who has been hoarding VHS tapes that record her own life’s memories. She is rendering her lost moments tangible and, therefore, present. I relate to her compulsion to try to preserve a moment and create tangible containers of moments in her life. During my graduate studies, I have been creating objects that could act as a record of transient interactions between others and myself. They remain as part of a collection, much like the VHS tapes snuggled next to each other. Like a blanket of memories, the objects offer comfort in their tangibility and accumulation. They fill a void that occurs when moments or people become part of the past.



Fig.5 *Handshake Collection (detail)* 2013

For some time now I have been interested in the traces we leave behind, the impressions we make upon each other. We rarely touch each other, and yet we are surrounded by people. There are a few gestures that are acceptable to implement when touching strangers. The handshake is

the initial democratic form of interaction. Both parties agree to touch.

I created my bronze Handshake Collection as a way of cataloging the entrance of people into my life during my first year in Richmond. It often feels difficult to maintain the connections I make to others as shifting yet continuous distances keep us apart. I began casting in bronze the space between my handshakes with people as they entered my studio by placing a small warm ball of wax between our hands and casting the resulting form in bronze. It seems fitting that the wax burns out, and a new material must replace it to make the object more permanent. In that sense, I have only a reinterpretation of that interaction, rather than an actual relic that has been touched by our hands. In another sense, these objects acted as a very tangible way to hold onto those people and my connection to them. By making the void a solid mass, I was in essence filling the void and creating something out of nothing.



Fig.6 *Handshake Collection*, 2013

Medical studies have shown the effects of human touch on our own heartbeats. As a person touches another person, the heartbeat slows down, as if relaxed and steadied by the closeness of another individual. My intention is to live on literally within the hearts of others and metaphorically through their memories of me. Appropriately, the weight of each bronze cast is relatively the same weight as the human heart. I see this as a metaphor for the emotional connections that occur between two people within the interstice of their hands.

These fossils act as a record of my physical interaction with others, but their representation in bronze patinas them with the sense of commemoration and importance I feel for these connections. Just as the skin is the first point of contact between the world and us, the handshake is the first appropriate entry point into the arena of physical contact between strangers. It is used to communicate so much: we agree, we know each other, we feel comfortable touching each other, we acknowledge one another, and so on.

BEING WITH AND BEING WITHOUT

Most humans have a fundamental need to be close to others. My objective is to discover ways to prolong the feeling of contact between people and to charge objects with the task of doing so. Many people are compelled to hold onto an object as a representation of someone or something that is gone. I can think of countless keepsakes in my own archives - a silver ring several sizes too big for my own fingers, a wooden box of folded letters, the shirt of a lost love - all shined, chipped, and worn thin from repeated touch as I revisit the memories they hold. These articles function both as tangible evidence of someone's presence and as the constant reminder of their absence.

While there are several artists who navigate this theory, I am also interested in "real world" examples of objects being used as repositories of memory. Mourning Jewelry² was a Victorian custom in which the decoratively manipulated hair of a deceased loved one was worn in remembrance of their constant absence. The hair became a stand in for their presence, a permanent memento of the loss of that person. In this case, the wearer was able to literally feel the person who was absent. While this practice placed an emphasis upon prolonging the loss of the person more than attempting to heal, it was a way of accepting loss as a part of daily life.



Fig.7 *Hairloom*, 2013

What can I leave behind that will relay evidence of my connection to the physical world? How can I make my existence feel more permanent? Using touch as a means to remember and be remembered, I created *Hairloom*, a small weaving of my own hair intended as a way for me to be remembered by a loved one. Hair is one of the few physical remnants of ourselves that we leave behind, both on a daily basis and when we move on. Weaving can be seen as a method of record keeping and source of comfort, having traditionally been employed to create tapestries to tell stories while also covering large walls to keep the cold at bay. The weaving is left unfinished to further remind the viewer of the presence of the hand in the making of the object, and therefore the continued presence of the maker.

This idea of unfinished work, or Work that has no end carried over into my next piece *34 Years...and counting...(Hair Tally)*. In this case I was interested in the textile as an object that tells a story, one that will never end. I continue to stitch with my hair a mark for every day I have lived, adding a panel for each new year. Over 35 feet long

now, I see it as a scorecard between death and myself in a game I intend to keep winning.



Fig.8 *Hair Tally*, 2013



Fig.9 *Hair Tally (detail)*, 2013

I am constantly trying to stop time. *Hourglass* is a memorial for the 2 weeks I spent in Maine this summer as a teaching assistant at Haystack Mountain School of Crafts. The hourglass, blown by artists in the glass program there, contains the eggshells I collected daily from our communal breakfasts and crushed by hand. Our time together has been frozen.



Fig.10 *Hourglass*, 2013

IMMORTALITY AND THE LIST OF WAYS TO LIVE FOREVER

I think that we choose to believe certain ideas are true, because they offer us comfort despite our own lack of control. My curiosity about the possibility of attaining immortality and my anxiety over the inevitability of death hinges upon this belief.

As a result, I have been slowly compiling a List of Ways to Live Forever. By soliciting suggestions from others, I have already compiled a growing list of over 200 ways to achieve immortality. While this list acts as a piece itself, I began this year with a series of attempts to embody some of the suggestions from the list. The List of Ways to Live Forever has accumulated to such a degree due mainly to the persistence of the human quest for immortality throughout history. Attempting to stay young and healthy, to be remembered, or to rely on the spiritual to transcend death are human inclinations that give us comfort in the face of our mortality.

Through photography, video, and the creation of objects, I have been amassing documentation of my attempts to tackle each suggestion on this list. I am using myself as a stand in for humankind throughout my attempts to live forever. I cannot do this alone. Though many of these ideas are my own, over half are suggestions from others. Some of them require the company or assistance of others as well.

Each of these actions requires a unique method of documentation, whether in the form of an object, image, or a manner as of yet uncharted. I had been spending so many hours outputting endless tasks, making work that inherently had no end. I wanted to see if I could create work more quickly that spoke more of the immediacy of

documentation. This endeavor is a continuation of my research into the human compulsion to endure and be remembered by others while remaining open to new or unexpected forms of documentation. I was equally interested in the ability of both object and image to function as credible evidence of my having carried out this investigation. I intended to display these experiments as if in a laboratory, where the boundaries between documentation and illustration, object and image, and truth and fiction become tenuous.



Fig.11 *Name a Star After Myself* (#147), 2013



Fig.12 *Attempt Mitosis* (#48), 2013

Stop Time (#29) is actually on the list and has already been achieved through *Hourglass*. An official certificate and star chart validates that I have been able to *Name a Star After Myself* (#147). I live on in the heavens (and on paper). Using my iPad, I was able to *Attempt Mitosis* (#48). Mimicking historical accounts of the great lengths a certain countess went to in order to preserve her youth, I tried to *Bathe in the Blood of Virgins* (#68). Or did I?



Fig.13 *Bathe in the Blood of Virgins* (#68), 2013

I have also been eating *An Apple a Day* (#203). I began taking photos with my phone, but then decided to hoard the seeds and stems as proof instead.



Fig.14 *An Apple a Day* (#203), 2013



Fig. 15 *An Apple a Day* (#203), 2013

While researching how to *Eat a Mediterranean Diet* (#9), I found that it is important to share it with others for its full life extending effects. So, I threw a dinner party with this theme on my birthday to celebrate the potential for eternal life. A photo was unable to capture the essence of the event, so the following testimonials will serve as documentation for this piece:

“Amidst the aromas from the kitchen, warm colors, and coziness of the home, I thought if the delicious food doesn't actually make you live longer certainly eating it in good company and a lovely atmosphere is incentive to try. ”

“When I try to remember sounds from that night, I can hear laughter and jovial chatter. Instrumental guitar. Everyone made a point to hug Erika when we left.”

“Even though we were mourning the loss of your youth, I felt so special and well cared for like it was more of a celebration of all of us being together with you...almost like a fun or lighthearted wake with really good food! I will never forget the tenderness of the chicken I had, it literally melted in my mouth. ”

On Halloween, I asked two photographers to accompany me while I headed out to *Attract Vampires* (#2). I dressed up as Sookie Stackhouse from the HBO series True Blood. Apparently we are living in a post-*Twilight* world as I was only able to track down one vampire all night, a Vampirite.



Fig.16 *Attract Vampires* (#2), 2013



Fig.17 *Attract Vampires* (#2), 2013

All of these attempts have led me to a realization. What is the point of living forever if you have no one with which to spend eternity? I began to focus on ideas that could be relayed through gestures involving two people by casting them in plaster-dipped silk. I could offer evidence of *Make a Deal with the Devil* (#41), if I went back to the handshake. I could *Wage & Win a War* (#128) – if it was a thumb war.



Fig.18 *Make a Deal with the Devil* (#41), 2013 Fig.19 *Wage & Win a War* (#128), 2013

My experiments have guided me back to the creation of objects that capture physical interactions between people. In my studio practice, this prompted a conflict between documentation and illustration. A young man visiting my studio offered up the notion of embodiment as an alternative to choosing between the two. I am always caught between two opposites, so this felt like a worthwhile consideration. It seems I eventually opted for a very literal enactment of that word. I started to cast the body

again in an attempt to embody gestures between people, landing often on moments of potential conflict. One person tries to leave, the other holds on tightly. One person tries to touch another, the other person recoils. Thumb war, however passive a gesture, has to have a victor by virtue of being a war. When two bodies come together, there is often a process of negotiation, each trying to achieve their own comfort or gratification while becoming aware of the other's needs. I believe there exists a point at which the two bodies, through the psychology of touch, begin to melt together, forming one skin. I am interested in defining the points of contact and illustrating that melting point. I want to create new skins that include both bodies rather than maintaining that separation.

TAPESTRY AND SAFETY INSTRUCTIONS

Looming in the background all this while taped to the studio wall at my back has been a set of airline safety instructions from a US Airways A321. Early on my list was the challenge to be prepared in case of any emergency. I snagged this tri-fold manual with the hopes of finding appropriate imagery from which to work. Nearly every time I fly, I fixate on the image that instructs us to place our own oxygen masks over ourselves before assisting others, even our children, in the event of an emergency. While there are rational reasons for doing so, it seems counter intuitive to the way humans are



Fig.20 *Mother and Child
(or Inhale) detail*, 2014

supposed to interact with one another. I also have a tendency to take stock of my life and make peace with the possibility of a plane crash. It sounds extreme and neurotic as the words hit the page, but it gives me a sense of calm despite a desperate fear of death. The more I looked at the image of the mother and child, it began to resemble a renaissance painting of the Madonna and child. Tapestries most typically displayed the narrative of a religious, mythological or heroic event. Often they functioned as a way to tell a story through images. These instructions began to read as a story that hasn't happened and hopefully never does. What if

that is one's last moment portrayed generically in this 8x14 laminated card in tiny digestible images.

I find a parallel between safety instructions, religious imagery, and the use of oxygen in the image. They are all ways to gain comfort when facing the incomprehensible. We can choose to put our faith in reason, or give it up to God, or simply inhale the oxygen and forget. The woman is clearly charged with the decision over whom to place on first, and her actions are necessary to the survival of the child. As humans we feel the simultaneous concern for our own survival and compassion for others.



Fig.21 *Mother and Child (or Inhale)*, 2014

RECOLLECTION OBJECTS

This work is a catalog of the people in my life and my persistent efforts to hold on to those fleeting connections. As Jacques Derrida states in *On Touching – Jean Luc Nancy*³, “we cannot survive one instant without being with contact, and in contact”. I view touch as a way of sustaining each other, and objects as a potential way of sustaining touch. Contemporary philosopher Laura Marks speaks of the witnessing capacity of objects asserting, “Personal objects remember and attest to events that people have forgotten.” Through performing the act of touch and subsequently manipulating materials such as bronze, eggshells, and my own hair, I record handshakes, hugs, and sentiments. Documenting my interface with both strangers and loved ones, I question the ability of the object to convey the emotions present in the moment. Engaging the body as a medium and its actions as process, the objects I make serve both as a vehicle for physical contact and as the commemoration of an ephemeral event.

I endeavor to immortalize my physical interactions with others through the creation of objects that act as documentation of that interface. These fossils serve as a tangible record of the connections I have made with other people. This investigation draws from a foundation of work like Rachel Whiteread's⁴ large scale casts of negative spaces or the



Fig. 22 Rachel Whiteread, Ghost, 1990

Billboards of Felix Gonzalez-Torres⁵, addressing notions of absence and presence, and public and private interaction. Although presented as an image, the bed in *Billboard* is the object left behind that relays both the presence and absence of his



Fig. 23 Felix Gonzalez-Torres, "Untitled" billboard,

deceased partner. Whether a hug or a handshake, the gestures I am navigating are at once universal and intensely personal.

As Derrida states, "We can live without seeing, hearing, tasting, and smelling ("sensing," in the visual, auditory, gustatory, and olfactory senses), but we cannot survive one instant without being with contact, and in contact." Touch is presented to the reader as more than just a sense. It is a way of experiencing the world that no living creature lacks. We cannot survive without touch, because without it we are not alive in this world. We would be unable to experience the world in a way that brings us close to it. It is proposed as a requirement of being. This passage makes a case for the importance of touch and its placement within the hierarchy of the senses. Derrida seems to be stating that it is the most essential sense we possess, above even sight when it comes to our survival. We might merely exist with none of the senses at all, so long as others are able to attend to our physical needs, but the mind, heart, or soul, if we have one, cannot survive without touch. It appears Derrida is touching on a more complex distinction of the word "survive", one that implies a life beyond mere existence, one that insists upon the necessity of physical contact.

Derrida continues to say, “touching means being in the world. There is no world without touching.”⁶ Touch is the way in which we not only observe, but also have the potential to respond to the world and be an active part of it. There is a quality to touch that both grounds and connects beings to the world they inhabit. There is a sort of indisputable verification of the existence of the surrounding world that can be attained only through touch. Touch is a kind of knowing that requires being with something or someone else. It stretches beyond knowing of or about. There is an inherent proximity or closeness that is imperative when experiencing anything through touch.

Touch is the closing in of space between two things. It is the closest way to experience another being or the world itself. Physical touch offers us the most intimate form of access to others. Living in a time when it is so easy to correspond over vast distances, we have become reliant upon so many impalpable methods of communication. Perhaps now more than ever, it is important to maintain a more physical connection to other people, one that privileges body language over a written one. Can any other type of contact truly offer the comfort tendered by the touch of a hand?

Objects allow us to reconnect repeatedly to the past by appealing to the memory of our senses. Our body engages with the shape or feel of an object that was touched by someone, and our senses remember how it felt to touch them. They are present in their absence.

Contemporary philosopher Laura Marks investigates the connection between objects and the people who have touched them in *The Skin of the Film*.

“Benjamin wrote that aura is the quality in an object that makes our relationship to it like

a relationship with another human being. It seems to look back at us (1968a, 188). Marx, and following him reluctantly, Benjamin, attempted to demystify the fetishistic character of auratic objects by showing that they gained their power from the human presences and material practices that constructed them. Aura is the sense an object gives that it can speak to us of the past, without ever letting us completely decipher it.”⁷

This forms the core of Laura Marks’ argument for the power of an object to recollect and put us into direct contact with the past, particularly people from the past. It gives weight to my assertion that an object can act as a stand in for human touch when the person or persons are no longer present. This aura refers to the characteristics of an object beyond just its form and material. It refers to the memory of those who have touched it and the attachment of that memory to the object. It brings the past into the present. Touch happens in the present, but an object can remind us of that presentness even when that present is now past.

An object can act as a mirror, reflecting to the one who is confronted with it all that it has absorbed or witnessed. Later in the chapter, Marks flatly states, “to touch something one’s mother, one’s grandparents, or an unknown person touched is to be in physical contact with them.”⁸ She cites an example in which a daughter is only able to truly remember her mother when she physically wears an article of clothing that belonged to her. There is a reference to slipping into the skin of the person. This describes more than a mere visual memory of someone. It means that, through touch, a person can be closer to the lost person by, in a sense, wearing or becoming them. There is a closeness instilled in this experience of memory through touch that achieves an intimacy other senses lack in their ability to convey what is forgotten.

Whereas the artists and filmmakers to which Marks refers in her text are teasing out “*the history that has become fossilized in an object*”⁹, I aim to create new objects for the purpose of containing a particular fleeting narrative. I am interested in the generation of personal fossils, objects that recall the particular event that manifests in the formation of its material evidence. I seek to immortalize an interaction through the creation of a moment-specific object. Marks differentiates between objects that represent and those that embody stating, “[*the fossil and the fetish*] do not symbolically represent power; they physically embody it. The notion of the fetish, in particular, I find epistemologically powerful because it is constituted from a physical, rather than mental, contact between objects; it is not a metaphor.”¹⁰ This speaks to the ability of the object to conjure up a memory not through metaphor, but through actual physical touch. The power lies in the physical contact between the object’s material and the person who has originally touched it. This physical interaction becomes embedded into the object’s being.

Through my work, I hope to achieve the physical embodiment of a moment. The moments that interest me most are the evanescent and complex interactions between two people’s bodies. By revealing the interstices and edges formed when two worlds come into contact with each other, an object might be able to, not only document, but also live on through a complexity of meaning. Marks expresses that “*the interstitial space of the fetish produces meaning, lots of meanings, but they are built on incomprehension.*”¹¹ Rather than dwelling upon the information that is lost when one tries to document a moment, the creation of an object, and art itself, offers an

opportunity for a new and evolving narrative. This is made possible by the integration of the viewer's own personal connections to the form and material of the object.

She speaks of the witnessing material of the object when she states, "*personal objects remember and attest to events that people have forgotten.*"¹² If an object is present at the time at which the memory is created, it can be considered to be a witness that records and relays the event without the erosive qualities of human memory. Objects remember in a fixed manner what we are prone to forget. Unlike an object, our memory shifts and fades continuously. Without the immediacy of touch, we pepper our histories with illusions afforded by a distance between our selves and the intangible past.

We are, however, charged with deciphering the memory contained within the object through the language unique to the material and formative process of that object. Artist Fred Wilson has stated "we understand the object as containing a storage of memories created in its production and use that are activated in our remembering, latent in the object with the possibility of being forgotten."¹³ There exists a tension between the object's embodiment of the past and its inability to truly convey it. Although it can offer an aura that includes the memory of the presence of someone, Marks describes the "unbearable reminder of absence" which is simultaneously at play. While the object brings the past to the present through material, it is an undeniable display of what is missing – the person who touched the object. Though objects may offer the comfort of bringing us closer to a past that is undiscoverable through another sense, they are containers of a history that can never truly be revealed.

As evidenced in recent exhibitions such as *40 Under 40* at the Renwick Gallery¹⁴, there is also a current movement toward performative work being practiced within the



Fig.24 Jennifer Crupi, *Ornamental Hands: Figure One*, 2010

greater Craft community. Processes such as weaving, casting, carving, or polishing reveal themselves to be markers of time that relay the gesture of the artist's hand. As the daughter of two ballet dancers, my approach to artwork is deeply rooted in the movement and expressive faculty of the body. I view the

relationship between dance and objects as one that involves defining both as choreographed movement. A utilitarian object requires a specific action in order to engage with it. In this way, an object with an implied function has the potential to choreograph movement. There is an implication of touch inherent in all objects. I aim to amplify the notion of object making being a performance in itself and reveal the objects that result as a record of that action.

I question what information might be absent in or obscured by objects. Documenting my interface with both strangers and loved ones, I challenge the ability of an object as documentation to convey the emotions present in the moment. Engaging the body as a medium and its actions as process, the objects I make serve both as a vehicle for physical contact and as the commemoration of an ephemeral event. They retain memories for those who were present at the time of the event. However, a handshake between enemies and a handshake between friends will register the same

imprint of lines and form into a mound of wax.

If presented in a way that hinders physical access by the viewer, as in a museum or gallery context, these cast objects would act more as clues that suggest how they were formed. This type of object stops functioning as a medium for physical contact and transforms into a conduit of memory. They are enacted and colored by our previous experiences of the particular action being presented. The object is not fully equipped to communicate the emotions that pass between two people at the time of contact, but it can act as a bridge to our memory of a similar interaction from our past. In this way, an object moves beyond being a record of an action and acts as an agent of memory.

Whether through object, image, or video, the documentation of an “event” is what extends our work through time and into the future. It is the ephemeral made permanent. We use documentation as a way of maintaining a connection to a time that has passed. Documentation allows the work to bring the past into the future, so it achieves a sense of immortality in that sense. Should the work be allowed to live in the space of distortion, or does it fail because it is unable to convey the reality of the moment? As Foucault writes, “What is found at the historical beginning of things is not the inviolable identity of their origin; it is the dissension of other things.”¹⁵ The origin of the work, in this case the event, becomes insignificant, and the documentation itself becomes the accessible origin of the interactive moment, the event, and the artist.

The act of touch itself - in the moment, skin against skin - reveals so much about the nature of the relationship between the people in contact with one another. Duration, intensity, tenderness, aggressiveness - these are all part of the dynamics of actual touch. As I delve further into the potential relationships between objects and the sense

of touch, I am struck by the potential complications of this investigation. I question the object's ability to transport us beyond an illustration of an event, and to have the potential to guide us through a re-enactment or embodiment. The object records or witnesses without prejudice, but can it truly divulge to a viewer the true nature of the emotions that were present at the time when physical contact originated? If the viewer was not present when the object was touched or had never felt the person who touched the object, then the truth disclosed by this object is merely a whisper of the intimacy that it represents. When it comes to offering comfort, there is no substitute for touch between people. While these relics of our interactions with others are a poor substitute for that connection, they are often as close as we can get.



Fig.25 *Sitting Next to K.S.*, 2014

HOLDING AND BEING HELD

Through this investigation I have allowed traditional materials and techniques to inform each other and overlap. I began to explore casting with bronze, fabric, plaster,



Fig.26 *Truly Love Someone* (#115), 2014

and chrome plating while experimenting with gesture and common physical interactions. The goal of this inquiry was to discover hybridized processes that result in sculptural manifestations of simple gestures. I envisioned chrome plated plaster kisses, the bronzed lace hollow of a hug, or a silk veil that suggests the touch of a hand to the small of one's back. If to *Truly Love Someone* (#115) were an object made of hydrocal and silk drapery plated in copper and chrome, could it disappear as a result of its reflective surface? Would its many

layers remind us of the nuances of feeling that pass through our skin and into each other? Might it appear to cascade like water, slippery and elusive as the emotions at play when two lovers hold hands? How can I wear a hug and carry it with me? Can I capture a sequence of hugs by breaking down a single cast of my own torso? Will it register the impact of affection? Each time we are held or let go, our shells crack revealing our vulnerability.



Fig.27 *Dress for Farewell Hugs*, 2014



Fig.28 *Holding Hands
(Within and Without)*, 2014



Fig.29 *Holding Hands
(Within and Without)* detail

Much of the work present in my final exhibition is the result of a one-week visit with a lover here in Richmond. I draped hydrocal laden silk over and around us as we held hands, pushed toward and pulled away from each other, and sat inches apart. Our physical time together this year has been so brief and intermittent. These objects are the husks we shed every time we part. Each farewell leaves me feeling just as raw and emptied as the last. The wet material, so heavy at first, becomes lighter as it hardens. Such is the quiet subtly of loss.

Alongside these apparitions is mounted a copper-plated, silk and hydrocal skin of our handshake. It would have been at this moment that we initiated our agreement to touch. It represents the beginning of our story and, therefore, shines and



Fig.30 *Handshake with K.S.*, 2014

shifts in color as the copper continues to oxidize indefinitely. Having been copper-plated and not bronze cast, the original object touched by both of us is still present though dormant beneath its layers.

I capture the interstices between and around two bodies as they shift between moments of connection. I employ materials that speak of endurance and longevity to record, form, and define transient spaces whose edges continuously shift or whose membranes are particularly tenuous. I use the body to question boundaries – between internal and external, comfort and disquiet, holding and letting go.

My intention for these objects was to serve not only as documentation, but also as an elongation of that moment, to monumentalize the usual, to make epic the discreet, to make my connections permanent. For me, holding the hand of a lover feels like an epic feat. I dwell upon airline instructions. I find eggshell membranes to be fraught with meaning. Simple interactions with people move me. I focus on those discarded materials, overlooked quiet instructions, and common but necessary gestures of comfort. I excavate my interactions and keep records. I don't want to lose a minute of my life, while I watch it slowly sift through my fingers. Through the skin, hearts and memories of others...I will live on.



Fig.31 *Where We Meet (Inside)*, 2014

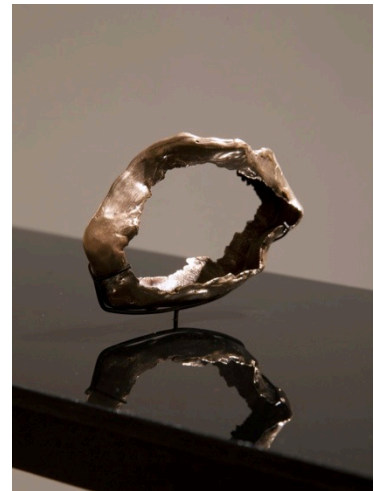


Fig.32 *Where We Meet (Inside)* detail

¹ *Hoarders: Buried Alive*. TLC. 2010. Television.

² Delorme, Maureen. *Mourning Art and Jewelry*. Atglen: Schiffer Publishing, 2007

³ Derrida, *On Touching – Jean–Luc Nancy*, p.140

⁴ Whiteread, Rachel. *Ghost*, 1999. Brooklyn Museum of Art, Brooklyn, NY

⁵ Gonzalez-Torres, Felix. *Untitled*. 1991. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY.

⁶ Derrida, *On Touching – Jean–Luc Nancy*, p.140

⁷ Marks, Laura U. *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*, p.81

⁸ Marks, Laura U. *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*, p.112

⁹ Marks, Laura U. *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*, p. 113

¹⁰ Marks, Laura U. *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*, p.92

¹¹ Marks, Laura U. *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*, p.90

¹² Marks, Laura U. *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*, p.107

¹³ Bliss, Hillary. *Fred Wilson and the Memory of Objects – Vera List New School Art Collection*. Web. May 8, 2012

¹⁴ “40 Under 40: Craft Futures.” Smithsonian American Art Museum, Renwick Gallery, Washington, D.C.

¹⁵ Foucault, Michel. “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History.” In *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, edited by D.F. Bouchard. Ithaca: Cornell University Press. 1977

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Whiteread, Rachel. Ghost, 1999. Brooklyn Museum of Art, Brooklyn, NY

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Education

2014 Virginia Commonwealth University, MFA Fiber
2000 Rhode Island School of Design, BFA Sculpture
1998 Edinburgh College of Art, Independent Study/Exchange

Residencies & Awards

2014 VCU Arts Graduate Research Grant
2013-2014 Departmental Graduate Teaching Assistantship Award, VCU, School of the Arts, Richmond, VA
2012-2013 Departmental Graduate Teaching Assistantship Award, VCU, School of the Arts, Richmond, VA
2011 Affiliate Artist, McColl Center for Visual Art, Charlotte, NC
2006 Affiliate Artist, McColl Center for Visual Art, Charlotte, NC
2006-2010 Artist-in-Residence, Little Italy Peninsula Arts Center, Mount Holly, NC
2008 Cultural Project Grant, Arts & Science Council of Charlotte-Mecklenburg County, Charlotte, NC
1996-2000 RISD Alumni Scholarship, RISD, Providence, RI
1998-1999 Leslie Herman Young Scholarship, RISD Sculpture Department, Providence, RI
1998 India Point Park Sculpture Competition, Award Winner, India Point Park, Providence, RI

Solo Exhibitions

2013 *Erika Diamond: Diamond Is Forever?*, Hawthorne Gallery, Craft/Material Studies Department, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA
2011 *Erika Diamond: Enduring Impermanence*, Ross Gallery, Central Piedmont Community College, Charlotte, NC
2007 *Erika Diamond: Reconstructing Nature*, Red Saw Art Gallery, Newark, NJ
2006 *Epidermis II*, Winthrop University, Rutledge Windows, Rock Hill, SC
Epidermis, Curated by McColl Center for Visual Art, Transamerica Building, Charlotte, NC
2005 *Hair Drawings*, The Queen's Beans Gallery, Charlotte, NC

Group Exhibitions

2014 Held, VCU Arts MFA Thesis Exhibition, Anderson Gallery, VCU, Richmond, VA
At What Cost? Costumes for Collaborative performance, UNCC, Charlotte, NC
2013 *FO/MENT*, VCU Crafts Candidacy Exhibition, Artspace, Richmond, VA
2012 *Studio 12*, McColl Center for Visual Arts, Charlotte, NC
GRASS Exhibition, Dalton Gallery, Center for the Arts, Rock Hill, SC
2011 *Affiliate Artist Exhibition*, McColl Center for Visual Art, Charlotte, NC
CPCC Visual Arts Department, Pease Gallery, CPCC, Charlotte, NC
Spring Fling, McColl Center for Visual Art, Charlotte, NC
Showdown (Winner Best In Show), Hart Witzgen Gallery, Charlotte, NC
2010 *Innovative Works* - North Carolina Dance Theater, Knight Theater, Charlotte, NC
Palate to Palette, McColl Center for Visual Art, Charlotte, NC
53rd Annual Exhibition of Contemporary Art, Strohl Art Center, Chautauqua, NY
Surface, Lark & Key Gallery, Charlotte, NC
2009 *Approaches II: Exchange between the Two Mecklenburgs*, Max L. Jackson Gallery, Queens University, Charlotte, NC
52nd Annual Exhibition of Contemporary Art, Strohl Art Center, Chautauqua, NY
Salon Performance - Chautauqua Ballet Company, Chautauqua Institution, Chautauqua, NY
Garden of Earthly Delights, Rahway Arts Guild, Rahway, NJ
2008 *Approaches: Exchange between the Two Mecklenburgs*, Forum Historisches-U, Pasewalk, Germany
2007 *Redsaw In Rahway*, Rahway Arts Guild, Rahway, NJ
Lucky Draw, Sculpture Center, Long Island City, NY

- 2006 *Invitational Group Show*, Red Saw Art, Newark, NJ
 Affiliate Artist Exhibition, McColl Center for Visual Art, Charlotte, NC
High Fiber: Transforming Materials, Curated by Lassiter Gallery, Bank of America Plaza, Charlotte, NC
- 2004 *Annual Members Exhibition*, The Light Factory, Charlotte, NC
- 2002 *Soul Surreal*, Star Shoes, Los Angeles, CA
Alumni and Faculty Triennial Sculpture Exhibition, Woods-Gerry Gallery, Providence, RI
Big Wave IV, Andrew-Shire Gallery, Los Angeles, CA
- 2001 *(pARTy)*, Loft at 55 South 11th, Brooklyn, NY
- 2000 *RISD Senior Sculpture Exhibition*, Woods-Gerry Gallery, Providence, RI
- 1999 *RISD Invitational Sculpture Biennial*, Woods-Gerry Gallery, Providence, RI
- 1999 *Inside Out*, Providence Arcade, Providence, RI

Professional Experience

- 2012-2014 Artist Assistant, Richmond, VA – Sonya Clark
- 2013 Teaching Assistant, Haystack Mountain School of Crafts, Deer Isle, ME
- 2010-2012 Gallery Facilitator/Co-coordinator, Central Piedmont Community College, Charlotte, NC
- 2001-2011 Art Preparator: Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, CA; Ace Gallery, Los Angeles, CA; McColl Center for Visual Art, Charlotte, NC; Bechtler Museum of Modern Art, Charlotte, NC; Harvey B. Gantt Center for African American Arts & Culture, Charlotte, NC
- 2010 Juror, Annual Student Juried Exhibition, CPCC, Charlotte, NC
- 2009 Artist Talk, University of North Carolina at Charlotte, Charlotte, NC
- 2006 Artist Talk, Winthrop University, Rock Hill, SC
- 2001-2002 Prop Fabricator & Set Dresser - Stewart Haase Art Directors, Los Angeles, CA
- 2000-2001 Artist Assistantships, New York, NY – Lesley Dill, Sandy Skoglund, Kristin Jones/Andrew Ginzel

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- April Denee, *Erika Diamond Makes Art from Recyclables*, Charlotte Viewpoint, July 19, 2011
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- Cristina Stavale, *Dance Salon Goes Green*, The Chautauquan Daily, July 2, 2009
- Barbara Schreiber, *Peregrinations in the Burbs*, November 10, 2009
- Silke Voß, *Annäherungen an Charlotte*, Nordkurier, Germany, November 19, 2008
- Andre Gross, *Bilhauerin kurbelt USA-Kontakte an*, Nordkurier, Germany, October 13, 2008
- Paulina Jasmer, *Ausstellung mit der Parnetregion*, Nordkurier, Germany, October 7, 2008
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- Sunita Patterson, *A Room of One's Own*, Fiber Arts Magazine, Summer 2006
- Tom Starland, *Trizec Properties...Exhibition at Bank of America Plaza*, Carolina Arts, March 2006
- Linda Louise Brown, *Spring Forward*, Creative Loafing Charlotte, April 5, 2006
- Celeste Smith, *Piping Hot Pictures*, Charlotte Observer, June 12, 2005